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# DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Vol. XLII, No. 3, Winter 2014

the magazine of the  
Democratic Socialists  
of America



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## Socialist Strategy in the 21st Century

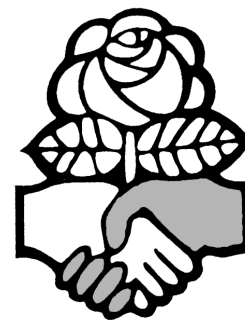




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## Socialist Strategy in the 21st Century



# Don't Mourn, Organize!

By Maria Svart

**A**s democratic socialists, we have a long-term vision and, by necessity, a long-term strategy. At the same time, we must understand the current terrain in order to get us from here to there. Last month's election results were disastrous for the Democratic Party and, by extension, the progressive movement. Not just because who holds state power has real implications (should we hold our breath about a national right-to-work law or more governors enacting policies from the ALEC playbook?), but also because, for many people, elections are their only engagement with the political process, and they engage in elections around one of the two major parties. This year's turnout was about 36%, lower than the last midterm election and the lowest in more than 70 years. As socialists whose vision includes a democratically run political system and economy, the apparent apathy should be a major concern to us. It also extends to movement work. The disinterest stems from cynicism about the role of government and the ability of ordinary people to have a voice and help enact laws to their benefit. And although we'd all like to think that at least disaffected voters are getting active in various movements for justice, it's not nearly as widespread as we need.



So why the low turnout, why the Republican wave, and what can we do to re-invigorate our own movement outside the formal political arena?

Yes, midterm elections always have lower turnout than in presidential election years and angry voters usually target the majority party for removal. Yes, big money had an outsized influence. At \$4 billion spent, this was the most expensive midterm in U.S. history, and \$200 million of that was from just 42 ultra-wealthy individuals. And yes, this was the first

election since the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, so legal voter suppression policies were enacted alongside more traditional (and illegal) ones in many states.

But these reasons alone don't explain the results. The truth is that the Democratic Party made critical, and predictable, mistakes.

The Democrats' message was that the economy has improved and they would continue those improvements. But most voters clearly are not feeling that their lives are better, and they know that economic growth since the recovery has primarily benefited those already rich. Some 63% of voters said in exit polls that the U.S. economic system generally favors the wealthy, despite being, as usual, whiter, older, and wealthier than the usual electorate during presidential election years (and certainly than the general population of the country).

Structural unemployment; low wages even with rising productivity; foreclosures; and continued pressures such as the high cost of child care, health care, and elder care have not gone away. When people could vote *directly* to improve their condition, they did, enacting minimum-wage increases in several states. Poll after poll showed that the economy was a top issue for potential voters, but faced with the contradiction between message and reality, the Democratic base stayed home. Whereas the Democratic candidates lacked credibility, the Republicans had a simple solution to individual and household economic problems: cut taxes. Given that low- and middle-income people bear a much higher proportion of taxes than they did in the pre-Reagan era, when corporate and upper-income tax rates were higher, this has a certain logic. If nothing else, struggling folks want a way to take care of themselves and their families, and they can't count on the old 20th-century social contract.

Could more Democrats have run on a fiery, pro-

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Cover art by Frank Reynoso

### Talking about DL:

If you would like to participate in a telephone discussion group about this issue of *Democratic Left*, please r.s.v.p. at [dsausa.org/calendar](http://dsausa.org/calendar) or call 212-727-8610. The conference call will be on Tuesday, January 13, 6 p.m. Pacific/ 9 p.m. Eastern.

# A Socialist Strategy for the 21st Century

By Jared Abbot and Joseph M. Schwartz

**D**SA's current organizational statement of principles and strategic vision, "Building the Next Left," was written almost 20 years ago, when the political and economic situation was different from that of today. It's time for a new statement, and the 2013 national convention mandated a two-year, organization-wide discussion in preparation for the rewriting.

Our long-term goal continues to be to achieve a democratic socialist society in which institutions—be they political, economic, social, or cultural—are democratically controlled by their participants. On the way from here to there, what are the intermediate steps, the strategy?

A coherent socialist strategy must first assess the state of global capitalism (its strengths and vulnerabilities), of contemporary U.S. politics, and of the social movements that resist aspects of capitalist domination at home and abroad. In turn, this evaluative process should shape DSA's understanding of how to build a stronger independent socialist movement that can help move the broad progressive movement in a socialist direction, as well as become an important political force in its own right. Finally, a coherent strategy would outline the specific tactics upon which DSA should focus its limited resources in the short- to medium-term.

To date, about 80 of DSA's most active leaders have taken part in an online forum and participated in monthly small-group conference calls on various strategic issues, such as the future of the labor movement and racial politics. What have we learned and what are the next steps?

## History of DSA Strategy

When DSA was formed in 1982 out of the merger of the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, many believed that the election of French Socialist president François Mitterrand and the focus of several European socialist parties on worker control of production prefigured the growth of a more radical trend in social

democracy. Consequently, DSA's original strategy envisioned strengthening the labor and the socialist wing of what we hoped would be a revitalized and radicalized U.S. liberalism and European social democracy. Few imagined the depths to which the left and labor would fall nor the resounding success, by the 1990s, of the bipartisan, neoliberal project of deunionization; deregulation; decreasing taxes on the rich and corporations; and trimming, if not gutting, social provision.

In 1995, after a four-year, organization-wide discussion, DSA revised its 1982 founding strategy document to argue that the organization had to take on not just the right but also centrist, corporate-funded Democratic Party elites. The document also stressed the importance of opposition to the right's use of racial politics to appeal to sectors of a deindustrialized white working class and the need to both rebuild American labor and strengthen emergent global labor and "fair trade" movements. This strategy, however, did not fully anticipate the spread of "third way" social democracy to the European continent or the displacement of socialist

ideology among radical social movements by decentralized, "horizontalist" and anti-statist visions.

## Discussions

In the current discussions among DSA activists, points of general agreement and points of disagreement have emerged. Most participants in the strategy discussion concur that DSA must develop a more serious internal educational culture that equips our members to articulate a socialist critique of capitalism and a vision of a socialist society. We must also educate effective organizers who build DSA's capacity. Most also concur that DSA locals need to engage in a stronger public moral critique of capitalism, while offering a compelling vision of an alternative society.

At the same time, two somewhat contrasting, albeit quite broad and porous, "strategic camps" have emerged. The first might be loosely termed a more



Frank Reynoso

militant version of DSA's traditional focus on coalition politics. This tendency would argue that in order to move the United States toward a more democratic and egalitarian society we must defeat right-wing racist efforts to restrict the franchise, deport immigrants, and gut social provision. At the same time, DSA should work to limit the power of capital (for example, by fighting for single-payer health care, labor law reform, and a financial transactions tax) and to reverse the stranglehold of big money over the political system. This strategic analysis contends that in order to put more radical "non-reformist" reforms on the agenda—reforms that limit the rights of capital, such as public ownership of the finance industry or mandated worker representation on corporate boards—the left would first have to build the political power necessary to reverse neoliberal policies of tax giveaways to corporations, the de facto elimination of a right to form unions, and the privatization and defunding of public goods. According to this analysis, if the broad labor-left is weak and the center-right is dominant, then there is little possibility of winning a full-blooded socialist alternative.

### **Anticapitalist Education**

The second tendency argues that even if the conditions that produced social democracy and welfare-state liberalism in the post-Second World War era could be revived, an alternative strategy to the class compromise of the Keynesian welfare state would be necessary to constrain the retaliatory power of capital. From this perspective, any revived progressive movement will fail to realize its full anticapitalist potential without a radical pole pushing it to the left, and socialists will fail in their medium- to long-term goals unless they build an independent space for socialist politics. This perspective contends that DSA should put its energy into organizing around explicitly anticapitalist demands—or at least framing more moderate demands in non-reformist language that emphasizes their anticapitalist potential—as well as building explicitly anticapitalist movements of resistance (such as Occupy Wall Street). While concurring with the other broad tendency in DSA that we must be deeply involved in anti-austerity/anti-racism coalitional work, this strategy would also emphasize radical public education around alternatives to capitalism and activist projects to the left of social democracy. They might also hold that, if

“Many DSAers reading this will likely see themselves within one camp on certain issues and within the other camp on others.”

DSA is to do electoral work, it should prioritize running explicitly socialist candidates.

Although significant differences exist between them, these two strategies are by no means incompatible, and many DSAers reading this will likely see themselves within one camp on certain issues and within the other camp on others. As an organization we face real and important strategic choices, as our human and financial resources are limited.

### **Next Steps**

The next stage of the strategy discussion process will be to solicit and discuss position papers on a range of strategic questions from any interested parties in DSA and encourage locals to hold their own discussions. Meanwhile, a drafting committee will begin work on a new statement of principles and strategic vision based on inputs received from the strategy conference calls. The committee will produce a document in early 2015 for discussion at a “virtual” strategy conference in April of 2015 (exact date to be determined). To save

costs in a year when we also have a DSA convention, we will hold weekend-long, regional in-person meetings that will be connected by video conferencing. This is in lieu of a national meeting and will allow more people to participate.

The conference will provide the drafting committee with the necessary feedback to redraft the document. The drafting committee will then distribute the revised document throughout the organization for discussion, which will lead to a working paper that can be debated and voted on at the fall 2015 DSA convention. We urge all rank-and-file activists in the organization to participate in the process and help set our organization on the best possible course for growth and success in the coming years. ❖

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*Jared Abbott is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Harvard and a member of the DSA NPC and chair of its Strategy Project Committee. For more information on the strategy discussion process or to join the discussion (which all DSA members are encouraged to do), please contact Jared Abbott at (703) 919-6379 or [jaredabbott@g.harvard.edu](mailto:jaredabbott@g.harvard.edu)*

# After Ferguson

Maria Svart Interviews Darnell L. Moore

After Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, this past summer, writer and educator Darnell L. Moore helped organize, with Patrisse Cullors, the Black Lives Matter ride over the Labor Day weekend. This action brought protesters to Ferguson to join the ongoing demonstrations against police brutality and increased militarization of the police. DSA National Director Maria Svart spoke with Moore soon after his return from #FergusonOctober, a mass mobilization attended by thousands of people from around the country, including some DSAers. Brown and Svart discussed building a movement against both capitalism and the so-called “colorblind” system of race relations that sustains white supremacy.

**Maria Svart:** Let’s start really big picture. Can you define white supremacy and how it intersects with capitalism, since there is a long history on much of the ideological left of treating racism as secondary to capitalist exploitation? How does white supremacy relate to #BlackLivesMatter?

**Darnell L. Moore:** White supremacy is an ideology that fosters systemic forms of racial discrimination, such as political disenfranchisement, economic deprivation, educational inequities, and poor health outcomes. It is based on the idea that white people are inherently superior to people of color. White people overwhelmingly control the corporate class—and benefit disproportionately from the labor of non-white workers—despite the fact that under capitalism all types of people are differently exploited regardless of who holds power. #BlackLivesMatter is a political intervention in a society, within a political system, that is antagonistic to black people.

**MS:** Alicia Garza, one of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter, mentioned in a post on *The Feminist Wire*, where you are a managing editor/partner, that part of the message of the campaign is that “when black people get free, everybody gets free.” Can you unpack that a bit?

**DM:** First, the black struggle for liberation is expansive enough to include the specific struggles of all people of color living under the weight of global white supremacy as well as the struggles of poor and working-class whites. It is possible, however, for poor and working-class whites to reinforce anti-blackness. Second, anti-blackness is so pervasive among whites and non-whites that it even shapes the



“Beyond analyzing whose feet are on our necks, we have to analyze whose necks our feet are on.”

ways we black folk see ourselves.. The fight against white supremacy is truly intersectional. Given that, #BlackLivesMatter is a call for *all* people to wrestle with anti-blackness.

**MS:** Narrowing down to the specific issues of police brutality and mass incarceration, what Michelle Alexander has called “the new Jim Crow,” what would be the elements of an ideal system of justice? How could the state be truly responsive to the community? What would “winning” look like?

**DM:** It wouldn’t look like anything we have now. We have to stop thinking of the justice system as that which can only be achieved by the state. The carceral state cannot be both the problem and the solution. An ideal system of justice, or a just society, is one free from an increasingly corporatized prison system, a society where we fix the problems (that is, poverty, educational inequity, racism, sexism, inequality, employment, to name some) and not react to the *effects* of the problems. We want communities where “justice” for victims of crime is humane accountability that rehabilitates people who commit crimes and restores relationships, when possible. The state could do more to ensure resources are used to redress various forms of structural inequalities as opposed to exacerbating them, like supporting suc-

cessful restorative justice or community-developed and -driven crime-reduction programs.

**MS:** We've heard a lot about how the leadership of young women of color has been central to the Ferguson rebellion, and in fact #BlackLivesMatter was founded by queer women of color. Why do you think that is, and why is it important?

**DM:** #BlackLivesMatter was conceptualized by three black women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. And, yes, black women have been and continue to be on the front lines in Ferguson and so many other places. It is important to acknowledge this fact because racial justice cannot be achieved if our concept of justice is one that focuses on cis-gender heterosexual men only. Too often, patriarchy, able-bodied centeredness, class stratification, and queer/trans antagonism hinder our racial justice work. When we say black lives matter, we mean *all* black lives.

**MS:** What are some of the new (or perhaps not so new) forms of organizing going on today around police brutality? Young folks in Ferguson, in Florida, in Ohio, and elsewhere, are experimenting with new forms of activism.

**DM:** Younger organizers are using various tools: new media technologies like Twitter, Vine, and Tumblr have allowed them to tell the story from their perspectives on the ground and to create counter-narratives beyond the limited and skewed stories the media have chosen to air. They have used cultural productions, such as hip-hop, as a source of inspiration for their protests and as a means to galvanize comrades. One of the actions I participated in during the #FergusonOctober Weekend of Resistance consisted of a peaceful protest held at night. We marched from the site where the Vonderbit Myers memorial is placed in the Shaw neighborhood [Myers was shot by an off-duty police officer working as a security guard on October 9, 2014.] We ended up in a gentrified business district in St. Louis called The Grove and shut one of the main intersections down while chanting, "They think it's a game." Youth organizers literally began playing games (i.e. Twister, double Dutch, dodge ball) in the middle of the street. It was genius.

**MS:** I usually feel a visceral rage when I hear about the latest incident of police violence and profiling (and the response from folks who don't think it's a problem at all). How can individuals and organizations take that immediate rush of energy and put it to good use to build long-term capacity to fight for justice?

**DM:** We have to move from reactive to proactive responses. This moment has activated folks from

around the world, and we can use the energy to do work in our local communities. We have to see incidents like Mike Brown's shooting as indicative of a larger problem. It isn't isolated, and once we understand that, it might move us to work to ameliorate police brutality, racial profiling, capitalist exploitation, educational inequities, and other structural forms of oppression in the communities we hail from. #BlackLivesMatter has issued a series of demands, for example, that folks can push in their local communities.

**MS:** For individual DSA members or local chapters, what are the best first steps to take to begin to make racial justice central to our activism? In my mind, it starts with educating ourselves and "showing up" in solidarity. Can you suggest some initial steps and some key blogs (including *The Feminist Wire*, of course!) or books to read and some things to keep in mind when engaging in anti-racist activism as a socialist?

**DM:** Self-reflexive analysis is a first step. Beyond analyzing whose feet are on our necks, we have to analyze whose necks our feet are on. We are all, in some ways, both oppressed and oppressor, and it behooves us to figure that out. Second, our work must be guided by multi-variable politics. We have to figure out which bodies are missing from our advocacy platforms and begin to center them in our work. I am thinking here of the recent state and philanthropic focus on boys and men of color through public-private initiatives like My Brother's Keeper, for example. MBK is a clear example of an initiative designed to ameliorate structural oppression that leaves some out, namely black and brown girls and women. I read blogs like *BlackGirlDangerous*, *Black Youth Project*, *TransGriot*, *For Harriet*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, and *Son of Baldwin* and follow the writings of Brittney Cooper, Mychal Denzel Smith, Jelani Cobb, Melissa Harris-Perry, Janet Mock, Kortney Ziegler, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin D.G. Kelley, Angela Davis, Cathy Cohen, and many others.

## For DSAers of Color and White Allies

If you are a person of color and would like to join a private DSA Caucus discussion group online on Facebook for members of color or if you are a white ally or a person of color interested in helping with the DSA Anti-Racism Working Group, email [info@dsausa.org](mailto:info@dsausa.org) and indicate whether you are interested in one or the other or both or go to [dsausa.org/antiracism](http://dsausa.org/antiracism).



# Shut Out from Democracy

By Bilal Dabir Sekou

The 15th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gave all male citizens the right to vote regardless of “previous condition of servitude,” and the 19th Amendment extended the franchise to women, but an estimated 5.85 million ex-felons have been disenfranchised by restrictive legislation in 48 states and the District of Columbia that prevents people convicted of a felony from voting. Only Vermont and Maine allow prisoners to vote, even though every state counts their bodies in apportioning congressional districts. According to the Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy project, some 75% of disenfranchised citizens are people who are no longer in prison but on probation or parole supervision. In some states, ex-felons who long since completed their sentence are still barred from voting. Let me emphasize that last point: some 2.6 million people who have paid their “debt to society” are not allowed to participate in the most fundamental act of a democratic country because they live in the 12 states that deny ex-felons the right to vote.

Felon disenfranchisement falls most heavily on people of color because of well-documented racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Again, according to the Sentencing Project, one of every 13 African Americans is barred from voting. In three states—Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia—more than one of every five African Americans is disenfranchised. In total, 2.2 million African Americans have lost their right to vote because of a felony conviction.

In the lead-up to this year’s election, pivotal swing states under Republican control rushed to enact tighter voting restrictions, such as photo ID, which 11% of eligible voters lack; an end to election-day registration or early voting; and restrictions on voter registration drives. These measures adversely affect people of color, the young, the elderly, and low-income people. They are part of a comprehensive and coordinated assault on the right to vote that started in 2008, when larger-than-usual voter turnout brought Barack Obama to the White House. Many groups have fought restrictions on voting, but felon disenfranchisement is a harder sell, one that democratic socialists should understand.

As long as people do not possess the right to vote, they cannot live as citizens of a democracy. When it comes to the right to vote, a simple standard should apply: (1) every adult citizen who wants to be registered is registered; (2) every adult citizen who wants

to vote can vote; and (3) every vote that is cast is a vote that is counted.

A number of national organizations engaged in litigation, legislative and administrative advocacy, and public education—including the NAACP, the ACLU, Common Cause, the Sentencing Project, the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, and the Prison Policy Initiative—work with local organizations on campaigns to restore the voting rights of people convicted of a felony and to end prison-based gerrymandering. Socialists are and should be a part of these efforts.

Last year, the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder* struck down the coverage formula of Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which had been critical in safeguarding the right to vote for people of color by requiring that jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination must receive preclearance from the U.S. Department of Justice before putting changes in their voting laws into practice. The Court ruled that the standard for judging discrimination has changed in the 50 years since the law was written. But Congress has the power to create a new coverage formula.

Socialists need to advocate for the strongest law possible to push back efforts at the state level designed to prevent or suppress voter participation. Likewise, although every state should allow prisoners to vote, as in Vermont and Maine, socialists can support the Democracy Restoration Act introduced in Congress by Representative John Conyers, Jr. (D-MI) and Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), which would restore voting rights in federal elections to individuals after they have been released from incarceration. ❖

*Bilal Dabir Sekou is an associate professor of political science at the University of Hartford, Department of Social Sciences, Hillyer College. He can be followed on his blog, Racial and Class Discourse from an Ivory Tower in Connecticut. (<http://www.racialdiscoursect.com>)*



# Making DSA More Accessible

By Mark Alper

**T**he Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 expanded the scope of accessibility beyond state and federal programs to include obligations for compliance by the private sector. Private membership groups such as DSA are exempted from the requirement to comply with the law, but as a democratic socialist organization committed to the expansion of democracy, it should be pro-active in making its meetings and activities welcoming to people with disabilities. Creativity and openness to experimentation will aid this process. Start by asking your comrades who are differently abled what they need from you.

Here are some suggestions as well as examples of how DSA chapters are dealing with accessibility. For instance, every chapter hopes to hold its meetings in free space, but with some searching, the chapter may

**“Start by asking your comrades who are differently abled what they need from you.”**

also find accessible space. Austin DSA, for example, uses the public library, which has accessible parking. Meetings in private homes are often not accessible, but union halls and community centers should be. Public cafés are an option as long as the obligation to buy something is not onerous to members.

Let's say that a deaf individual wants to attend a meeting of the DSA chapter and requests a sign language interpreter. The chapter doesn't have the financial resources to pay for an interpreter. An alternative solution would be to look for volunteers or ask the individual to bring an interpreter to the meeting. Because sign language interpretation is very demanding, this may mean more breaks in the meeting. If no interpreter is available, someone might be able to write a summary of what is happening on a laptop, and communication could occur through writing. At the least, reserved seating should be held for people who have hearing difficulties. Notices of

meetings can ask about accessibility issues

If there is an educational meeting that involves a PowerPoint presentation, a visually impaired person might ask for a recording of the presentation in order to be able to refer back to it as a sighted person would to notes. An ally can be named to be with someone at a demonstration, especially if civil disobedience is planned. Barbara Joye of Metro Atlanta DSA recalls that members volunteered to read proposed resolutions and national and local newsletters as well as readings for study groups to a blind member.

Members who have speech impairments resulting from strokes or conditions such as Parkinson's should not have to feel that they won't be heard because others are impatient for them to finish a thought.

YDS co-chair Andee Sunderland notes that the Sacramento DSA is also aware that individuals have “invisible disabilities, like anxiety disorders, depression, learning disabilities, etc. I think [making the chapter accessible] relies on building a pretty tight community where you have an idea of what people need, what their triggers might be, what sort of things they're good at . . . so we don't turn them off by giving them responsibilities they can't fulfill. . . . Some people panic around crowds or cops so we try to look out for them at demos. . . . I think the best you can strive for is a group where people feel comfortable voicing their needs and boundaries, and where they are generally taken seriously.”

Despite the advances in civil rights represented by the ADA, persons with disabilities face an ongoing struggle for essential services that are often on the chopping block by state legislatures—most particularly in the realms of housing, transportation, and education. ❖

*Mark Alper has been involved in the struggle for disability rights for 38 years.*

## **Chicago DSA podcast on disability rights:**

<http://www.chicagodsa.org/ts/ts040.html>

**DSA/YDS Disability Caucus/Working Group**  
Co-Chairs: Leah Terry, [terrylc0@sewanee.edu](mailto:terrylc0@sewanee.edu) and Melody Yee, [melody.the.yee@gmail.com](mailto:melody.the.yee@gmail.com)

# Capital, Kapital, and the Continuing Struggle

By Bill Barclay

*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*

By Thomas Piketty

What can you say about a book that has been reviewed dozens of times, was a *New York Times* best seller for three weeks, led to numerous book discussion groups, and has been a cultural phenomenon? You can say that Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (hereafter *Capital*) is worth the fuss. It has brought what socialists have known for a long time to the wider public.

## Pushing Paradigm Change

In the last 40 years, the dominant paradigm in economics has been that of Friedrich Hayek's "catallaxy," defined as "the order brought about by the mutual adjustment of many individual economies in a market." Translation: unregulated markets will eventually work out to the benefit of all. In support of that paradigm, Nobel Prize winner Robert Lucas has argued that "of the tendencies that are harmful to sound economics, the most seductive, and in my opinion the most poisonous, is to focus on questions of distribution . . ."

And focusing on distribution is exactly what Piketty does. He analyzes the distribution of income and wealth and their determinants for the past 250 years to show that unregulated capitalism is making the rich richer and the rest of us poorer. This will not come as a surprise to those who have been paying attention. What's new is that our economic and political elites have taken notice, some favorably (Paul Krugman), others less so (the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board). Some whose praise we might not expect argue that the book raises important questions (the World Bank's Branko Milanovic). But none are ignoring it.

A major reason for the recognition, grudging or

otherwise, of *Capital*, is its popular reception. Everywhere in the United States, individuals, discussion groups, and meetups have been reading and talking about the book—or at least part of it. One analysis maintains that most people reading electronic versions of *Capital* do not get past page 26, but you can learn a lot from those first pages.

A significant part of the cultural phenomenon is a matter of timing, but here luck and hard work reinforce each other. Although Occupy is given the credit for mass popularization of the 1% versus 99% meme, it is Piketty and his colleague Emmanuel Saez who have been doing most of the heavy lifting, with more than a decade of work on income concentration. The

combination resulted in what an economist might call a virtuous circle: Piketty and Saez labor in (relative) obscurity to increase focus on the top 1%, Occupy's architects use their work in a mass mobilization, and Piketty publishes a book that further opens the door for new political thinking and organizing around the problem of inequality.

## Piketty's Arguments

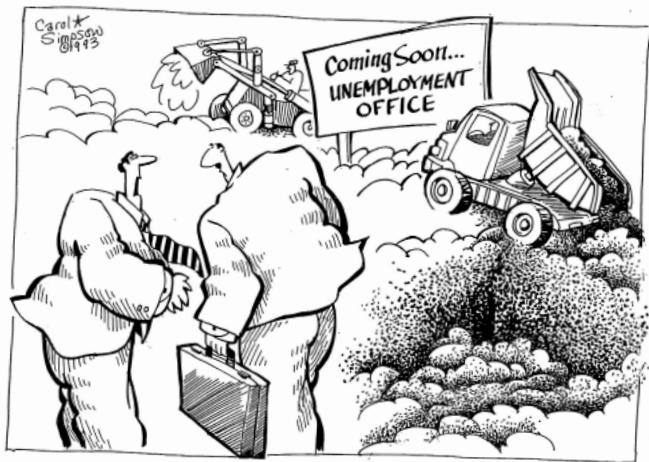
Marx begins *Kapital* by inquiring into the nature of a commodity. Piketty begins *Capital* by asking what determines income and wealth distribution. Marx sought a theory of capitalism as a system and Piketty seeks a theory of (trans-historical) capital.

Capital for Piketty includes real property as well as professional and financial capital. He recognizes, however, that "true wealth consists primarily of financial and business assets." Here are some of his more interesting and salient conclusions:

First, there is a tendency for capital to increase, because, over the long run, returns ( $r$ ) on capital ( $c$ ) are greater than rates of economic growth. Piketty writes it as  $r > g$ . The  $r > g$  tendency is much like Marx's falling rate of profit: observable historically but not provable mathematically. Piketty shows that the past devours the future. As capital in private



"You're kidding. You still pay taxes?  
It's a nostalgia thing? Right?"



*"Another sign of a surging economy—new construction."*

hands increases, so does inequality. Think about the Gilded Age of the late 19th century and the United States today.

This tendency was masked for a time because, after the Second World War, high economic growth rates produced  $g > r$ . Piketty argues that this resulted from the widespread destruction of capital during the wars and the increased regulatory jurisdiction over capital that characterized the "social state." I would argue that the increased regulatory jurisdiction over capital exercised by the state was at least as important as the destruction of capital in the Second World War. For example, although the Nordic countries suffered less destruction of assets than did central Europe, they created the most extensive system of capital regulation by the social state.

The asset price depression and resulting need to rebuild after the Second World War were the impetus for the "golden age" that lasted into the early eighties. Capitalism and democracy, capitalism and the social state, and capitalism and reduced inequality appeared to be linked. Not so, says Piketty, who sees the golden age as the exception rather than the rule.

Piketty's emphasis on returns and growth highlights the question of the circumstances under which social state regimes can be created and casts a different light on the role of social democratic parties and the mediation of class conflict. If the driver of the creation of the social state was  $r < g$ , it implies a reduced significance of class conflict at the point of production, in contrast with solidaristic wage policies, pushing low-road enterprises up the technology curve, and taxing the higher profits of successful firms to fund the social state.

Neither the dominant comforting theory that the growth of capitalist political economies (in say, China) will increase equality or the related assumption about the stability of the income shares of capital and labor (the rising tide lifts all boats theory) ap-

pears realistic. The U.S. experience in the past 30 years leads to the same conclusion.

Further, very high-income households spend to ensure for their offspring the same powers and privileges they enjoy. If, as Piketty argues, larger agglomerations of capital are able to achieve higher rates of return, class power becomes more entrenched and inheritance accounts for more and more of one's fate.

#### **Piketty's Answer to "What is to be done?"**

In the concluding chapters, Piketty makes concrete proposals that socialists can rally around. He does so first by a discussion of the "social state." Prior to about 1920, the rich countries had a "night watchman" state that fulfilled the functions of public safety, law enforcement, and foreign defense. This required government revenues in the range of 10% to 12% of national income. Between 1920

**“If, as Piketty argues, larger agglomerations of capital are able to achieve higher rates of return, class power becomes more entrenched and inheritance accounts for more and more of one's fate.”**

and approximately 1980, tax revenues as a share of national income jumped: three-fold in the United States, four-fold in the United Kingdom and France and five-fold or more in the Nordic countries. Since then, tax revenues have plateaued as a share of national income. In Piketty's overview, about half of the increased revenue has gone to health and education and the other half to pensions and transfer payments. Piketty notes that the United States, an outlier, gives less to these categories and more to military spending. The important point, however, is that this was all possible because of the shift in the

r and g relationship. With the return to patrimonial capitalism (that is, enormous wealth in the hands of individuals) in the 21st century, the  $r > g$  tendency is reasserting itself.

Piketty argues that significantly higher marginal tax rates will neither discourage people from working nor encourage tax avoidance. A top rate of about 78% is quite reasonable, with little or no negative impact on economic growth.

Piketty's proposal is much more radical than income tax reform, however. He calls for a progressive global tax on capital—or, failing that, a Europe-wide tax on capital. This proposal has been met with much skepticism, similar, we can assume, to the skepticism toward the proposal for progressive income and high inheritance taxes made by two guys named Karl and Friedrich in 1848.

The goals and benefits of the global wealth tax are important to consider. The tax would not be designed primarily to raise large amounts of revenue but to stop the inequality spiral and to regulate the financial system to prevent future crises such as occurred in 2007 and 2008.

Piketty makes several arguments for his tax. Although raising income is not its main goal, even a very low rate would raise a significant amount of revenue, equal in the European case to about 2% of GDP. Second, this tax would more accurately reflect the capacity of the very wealthy to contribute to the general good. At the top of the income/wealth pyramid, even very high marginal income tax rates are limited in their ability to raise additional revenue because the very wealthy do not take all their potential income as a current flow; much accumulates in trusts and other tax-protected vehicles. A tax on capital is an important complement to a progressive income tax. Third, a global wealth tax would dramatically increase financial transparency. Piketty notes that, according to the best official statistics, the world as a whole has a negative balance of payments. This impossibility is the result of tax havens that hide significant amounts of income and wealth. These havens would be ended by his tax on capital.

## For Women DSAers and Feminist Allies:

If you self-identify as a woman and would like to join a private, woman-only DSA Caucus discussion group online on Facebook, or if you are any gender and are interested in helping with the DSA Socialist work group, email [info@dsausa.org](mailto:info@dsausa.org) and indicate whether you are interested in one or the other or both or go to [dsausa.org/feminism](http://dsausa.org/feminism).

Piketty makes less use than he might of another strong argument for a tax on capital. Most wealthy countries already have a wealth tax—but on residential property only. Tax fairness demands that a wealth tax be extended to the forms of capital that are the basis of the huge fortunes that increasingly dominate our politics and our economies.

There is much more that could be said about this remarkable book. The underlying data are impressive, and the focus on distribution opens new vistas and ways of thinking to political economists. *Capital* will not replace *Capital* in my bookcase, but I'll put it on the same shelf. ❖

*Bill Barclay is co-chair of Chicago DSA and a founding member of the Chicago Political Economy Group.*

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## Changing the Conversation

# The Legacy of Occupy Wall Street

By Maurice Isserman

Three years ago this fall, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) set up its tents in Lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park and hunkered down for a long stay. Occupy has yet to receive the in-depth historical examination it deserves, but one thing that the movement's chroniclers will almost certainly agree upon is that it "changed the conversation" about income inequality and Wall Street's economic and political dominance.

The political mix in Occupy sites across the nation varied from locale to locale (and sometimes from day to day), but in almost every site where there was a DSA chapter, DSAers and voices for democratic socialism were involved. The Zuccotti Park encampment got the most media attention. Its prefigurative, counter-cultural style of politics, acting out the utopian future through an anarchist-style (and often glacially slow moving)

form of self-government, plus its reluctance to formulate demands, were among the defining features of the New York occupation, but there were political counter-currents beneath the surface, including democratic socialism. Cecily McMillan, a member of the Young Democratic Socialists Coordinating Committee, was present at the creation of Occupy, and argued throughout the fall for it to adopt a set of formal demands. (More recently, she became famous as "the last Occupy defendant," when she was tried, convicted, and sent to Rikers Island for an alleged assault of an NYPD officer in Zuccotti Park.)

Sarah Leonard, at the time an associate editor of *Dissent*, was one of the youthful editors of *Occupy Gazette*, which brought out four issues. Three years on, she remains appreciative of Occupy's achievements, but also offers an explanation for its dissolution:

There are very few ways that Americans are trained to organize now and very few strong institutions to support growing mass movements. It's also true that the same anarchist framework that was responsible for creating a surprising, brilliant protest did not have much interest in building mass membership organizations or institutions. Most important, the cops in New York made the protest a scary place to

be, particularly for people of color.

Historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote that third parties in American politics (and insurgent social movements more generally) were like bees: they sting and then they die. But what a sting Occupy delivered before its death. Veteran New Left activist Todd Gitlin's sympathetic outsider's account, *Occupy Nation* (2012), traces the shift in Barack Obama's speeches in the months following the occupation of Zuccotti Park, as the president found it politically expedient to embrace the concerns and even the signature catch-phrases of Occupy. Denouncing the "breathtaking greed of a few" in December 2011, Obama pledged his support for policies that would make the United States a country where "everyone does their fair share . . ." and "everyone plays by the same rules." "These aren't 1 percent values or 99 per-

cent values," he concluded. "They're American values. And we have to reclaim them."

Is Occupy a sustainable model for future protests? Probably not, although vestiges remain in such projects as the *Occupy Finance* book, the Flood Wall Street demonstration the day after the Peoples Climate March, and Occupy Sandy. Is Obama's conversion to economic populism sincere? Almost certainly not. What needs to be understood, however, is that, because of Occupy, the political terrain has shifted since September 17, 2011, in ways that have provided new opportunities for progressives in the Democratic Party (Elizabeth Warren, Bill De Blasio) who are genuinely concerned with economic inequality. Occupy is dead, but the sting remains. ❖

*Maurice Isserman is the author of several histories of the American left, including The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington. He was a frequent visitor to the Occupy Utica (New York) encampment in the fall of 2011.*



Sept. 22, 2014, Flood Wall Street demonstration. Photo by Coulter Loeb

# Novels for the Not-Yet-Socialists

## Young Adult Fiction

We asked members of the YDS Coordinating Committee what novels they might give to a younger sibling this holiday season or what had influenced them. If you have a young adult on your gift list, you might want to check them out (or read or re-read them yourself). We encourage you to order from a local independent bookseller—*Ed.*

*The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath is a unique coming-of-age novel. Protagonist Esther Greenwood gets an internship at an upscale magazine in New York City. Rather than being the bright-eyed college student drawn by the allure of the city, she begins questioning her path in life and slowly spirals into depression. Throughout her struggle with depression she questions the role of women in society and the pressure they have to take on domestic duties. Greenwood consistently questions the oppressive patriarchal society of America in the mid-20th century. Greenwood is a strong female character whom young women can look to when searching for their feminist identity. *Shelby Murphy*



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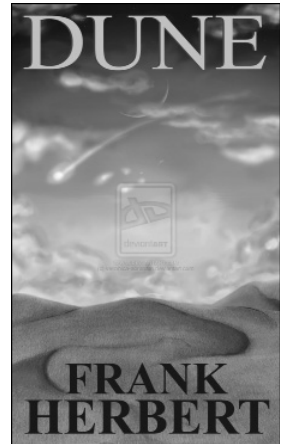
*Capital—In Manga!* Karl Marx's ground-breaking work is as relevant today as when first published in 1867. Our current chaotic "boom and bust economy" coupled with the mass exploitation of a truly international work force makes Marx's analysis of the laws of capitalist motion extremely useful to organizers. Introducing people, especially young readers, to Marx's tome, however, is a difficult task given its length and denseness. Luckily, *Capital—In Manga!*, published in 2012 by Red Quill Press, provides a graphic, novelized introduction to key concepts of *Capital*. The story follows Robin, a young cheese-maker, who confronts moral dilemmas and



class contradiction as his company grows. *Capital—In Manga!* is a must-have for young people who are interested in Marx but unsure of where to start. *Andee Sunderland*

&

Most people on the left have had that "aha!" moment, when radicalization began. Mine started in my early childhood with books, and with a few books in particular. One of them was *Dune*, by Frank Herbert. *Dune* is set in the arid desert of Arrakis, where the most valuable natural resource of them all can be found, spice. Spice is so valuable that wars are fought over it, lives are risked to mine it, and treaties have been made to stop one nation from monopolizing it. The protectors of this desert are called Fremen, who live in what I would call something very near the last stage of communism. This book is one of the greatest works of science fiction, and anyone who loves the genre should read it, many times if possible. *Femi Agbabiaka*



&

Ray Bradbury paints a dismal, dystopian future in his classic novel *Fahrenheit 451*, where it has become a social norm for people to spend their time watching television and listening to the radio without engaging in critical thinking or even appreciation of the world around them. Books, in Bradbury's dystopia, are not only banned, but actively sought out and burned by "firemen." The story follows the awakening of fireman Guy Montag, as he realizes the value of books while recognizing how dangerously conformist society has become. Despite its simplistic story line, the novel presents a powerful reminder



of the dangers of conformity and censorship. *Fahrenheit 451* warns of the toll censorship and the resulting conformity will take on society. As socialists, we should heed this warning by challenging censorship as it appears. *Melody Yee*

&

*Persepolis* is an autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi. It's divided into two sections that tell the story of her life both before and after the Islamic revolution in Iran. The first part covers her childhood in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, with part two picking up with Marjane attending high school in Vienna and then carries on through her return to Iran for college, her marriage, divorce, and leaving Iran to live in France. I recommend this novel because it does a fantastic job of showing that



regardless of the differences among global leaders, the people aren't all that different. *Jacob Curry*

### Other Resources

[www.bustle.com/articles/18681-5-amazing-young-adult-novels-starring-characters-of-color](http://www.bustle.com/articles/18681-5-amazing-young-adult-novels-starring-characters-of-color)

[www.xojane.com/entertainment/diversify-your-ya-six-books-with-minority-main-characters](http://www.xojane.com/entertainment/diversify-your-ya-six-books-with-minority-main-characters)

[www.malindalo.com/2013/10/ya-books-about-lgbt-characters-of-color/](http://www.malindalo.com/2013/10/ya-books-about-lgbt-characters-of-color/)

<http://disabilityinkidlit.wordpress.com/>

<http://flavorwire.com/457048/15-teen-feminist-books-everyone-should-read/view-all>

## Announcing Our Legacy Circle

Our Legacy Circle program lets you make a final gift to ensure that the values we share will receive the support they deserve. A bequest of any size will help us meet the challenges of 21st-century capitalism. Thank you to our Legacy Circle members as of mid-November 2014. For more information about how you can become part of the Legacy Circle, call DSA's National Director Maria Svart (212) 727-8610 or email [msvart@dsausa.org](mailto:msvart@dsausa.org).

### Thank you to

Jared Abbott  
Mark S. Alper  
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## Books by DSAers

Once a year we publish a list of recent books by DSAers. If your book has come out since the Spring 2014 issue, please send us the title and publisher by January 1. If we missed you last year, but the book was published in the past three years, let us know: [deditorvol@dsausa.org](mailto:deditorvol@dsausa.org)



gressive populist message? This would have energized the traditional Democratic base and appealed to non-union, non-wealthy white voters who know they are being screwed economically. This message worked in few places, when coupled with a multi-racial coalition of organized progressive groups. But channeling this anger requires pointing fingers at Wall Street and other major donors to the party, demanding an end to the class warfare of the last 40 years and a reversal of the wealth redistribution from workers' pockets to the rich, ending corporate welfare, and investing in infrastructure and safety net programs. Instead, we got moderate, "We're-not-the-Tea Party" technocrats who prefer social issues to economic ones (or in some cases, viciously neoliberal Democrats such as New York's Andrew Cuomo). Given the choice between Republican-lite and Republican candidates, voters either voted their cultural and gender identity or stayed home.

Candidates (and their consultants) may also have been concerned about raising economic issues because of the link in the minds of many white voters (of all classes) between a "culture of poverty" and black people, including President Barack Obama. Republicans employed coded racial language and tied the economic distress of individual (white) voters to mythical parasitic public employees, immigrants, poor mothers, and young "thugs," effectively using smoke and mirrors to deflect voter anger about economic insecurity onto traditional scapegoats. Democrats gave halfhearted defenses and shied away from a decidedly un-fierce Obama, addressed neither mass incarceration nor immigration reform with real solutions, and couldn't bring themselves to talk about the *real* moochers, those at the top. The dominant racial and economic paradigm continues unchallenged, and those same professional consultants are now urging a return to the middle (or should I say, the center-right?).

These are problems we all see, but the question remains: what to do. In the next two years, Obama will be pushed into a corner by congressional Republicans wielding budget bills, and on too many issues he will be only too happy to use "bipartisanship" as cover to enact more austerity measures, including cuts to Social Security and a fast track for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, to say nothing of what the GOP can force through on its own. We have to fight tooth and nail, and use this as an opportunity to build. The Republicans were elected by less than 20% of the U.S. voting eligible population, and they do not have

the mandate for destruction that they claim. We have time to organize for Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), urging him to run for president in the primaries and build a grassroots movement that is outside formal politics and in which DSA could play a major role as an openly democratic socialist organization. We have to build a movement that both understands the importance of elections as a tool but realizes that it is but one part of our toolkit.

The good news is that the demographic changes could make the 2016 election terrain better for progressives, if voter suppression can be stopped. But the same demographic changes that favor progressives could strengthen the white backlash against economic justice (particularly in the absence of a

national populist narrative), so we must use the conversation created by Ferguson to expand or initiate work around racial justice and build more commitment to it in white communities. Whites are currently the largest slice of the electorate, and studies show that they will support stringent voting rules that target people of color.

Absent a strong movement that ties workplace rights, economic rights, and racial justice together in one narrative, they could hold on to that majority, and our progress outside of formal politics will be stunted as well.

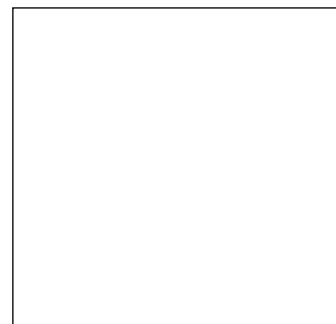
But most important, we need to think big. Elections are but one tool for liberation, and we can expect no one but ourselves to build independent, democratic socialist institutions with a longer range vision than that of the next two years and a more transformative goal than incremental reforms. Yes, that means I need YOU to donate more time or money to DSA. Democratic politicians refuse to admit the structural problems of the capitalist system. Consequently, when they are in the White House or in the majority in Congress, the failures of capitalism become their failures. It's our job to point out that the basic problem is capitalism itself. The GOP is strong precisely because it has ideological institutions that plan and organize for the long game. We must do the same. ❖

“But most important, we need to think big.”

Sign our online petition urging Senator Bernie Sanders to run for president at [www.dsausa.org/sanders\\_petition](http://www.dsausa.org/sanders_petition).

Democratic Left

**Change the USA! Join the DSA!**



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Enclosed is an extra contribution of:  \$50  \$100  \$25 to help DSA in its work.

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